



HE came unto his own, and his own received him not. 12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: 13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (John 1: 11-14)

After the perfect example of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must learn to identify with and relate to those to whom we preach and teach and before whom we walk. In the story of Damien, the lepers paid him little mind until he became one of them!

The following story is taken from a public school textbook (The Golden Key, published by McMillan & Sons, 1913)

The Apostle to the Lepers
by Mrs. Andrew Lang

No one can travel through the countries of the East or sail about the lovely islands of the South Seas without constantly seeing before him men and women dying of the most terrible of all diseases—leprosy.. The poor victims are cast out from their homes, and those who have loved them most, shrink from them with the greatest horror, for one touch of their bodies or their clothes might cause the wife or child to share their doom.. Special laws are made for them, special villages are set apart for them, and in old times as they walked they were bound to utter the warning cry, "Room for the leper! Room!" (In the days of our Lord on earth, the shout was, "Unclean, Unclean!")

From time to time efforts have been made to help these unfortunate beings, and over two hundred years ago a beautiful island in the Aegean Sea, called Leros, was set apart for them, and a band of nuns opened a hospital or lazar-house, as it was called, to do what they could to lessen their sufferings, and sooner or later to share their fate. Nobody, except perhaps the nuns' own relations, thought much about them—people in those days considered illness and madness to be shameful things, and best out of sight. The world was busy with discoveries of new countries and with wars of conquest or religion, and those who had no strength for the march fell by the wayside, and were left there. Nowadays it is a little different; there are more good Samaritans and fewer Levites; the wounded men are not only picked up on the road, but sought out in their own homes, and are taken to hospitals, where they are tended free of cost.

It is the story of a man in our own times, who gave himself up to the saddest of lives and the most lonely of deaths, that I am now going to tell you.

On a cold day in January 1841 a little boy was born in the city of Louvain, in Belgium, to Monsieur and Madame Damien de Veuster. He had already a brother a few years older, and for some time the children grew up together, the younger in all ways looking up to the elder, who seemed to know so much about everything. We have no idea what sort of lives they led, but their mother was a good woman, who often went to the big church in the town, and no doubt took her sons with her, and taught them that it was nobler and better to serve Christ by helping others and giving up their own wills than to strive for riches or honours. Their father, too, bade them learn to endure hardness and to bear without complaints whatever might befall them. And the boys listened to his counsel with serious faces, though they could be merry enough at times.

The lessons of their early years bore fruit, and one day the elder boy informed his parents that he wished to become a priest. It was what both father and mother had expected, and most likely hoped, and they at once agreed to his desire. Arrangements were soon made for his entering a training college, where he would have to live until he was old enough to be ordained.

Joseph, the younger, missed his brother greatly. He loved his father and mother dearly, but they seemed far too old to share the thoughts and dreams which came to him in the night-time, or during the quiet moments that he passed in church. Yet, from what we know of his after-life, we may be quite certain that he was no mere dreamer, standing aloof from his fellows. He was fond of carpentering and building; he watched with interest while the workmen were laying down the pipes which were to carry the water from the river to some dry field; he noted how the doctor bound up wounds and treated sores; and indeed no sort of knowledge that a man may gather in his everyday existence came amiss to young Damien. As to what he would do when he was a man, he said nothing, and his parents said nothing either.

On 3 January 1860, Joseph was nineteen, and Monsieur Damien proposed to take him as a birthday treat to see his brother, and to leave the two together while he went to the town on some business. It was a long time since they had met, and there was much to ask and hear. We do not know exactly what took place, but when Monsieur Damien returned to fetch Joseph, his son told him that he had made up his mind to follow in his brother's steps, and to be a priest also.

Monsieur Damien was not surprised; he had long seen whither things were tending. He would perhaps have liked to keep one son with him, but Joseph was old enough to judge for himself and he did not intend to make any objection. Still, he was hardly prepared for the boy's announcement that farewells were always painful, and that he thought he would best spare his mother by remaining where he was until she had

grown accustomed to doing without him. Then he would beg permission to come to see her for the last time before he became a priest.

Very reluctantly Monsieur Damien gave his consent to this plan. He tried in vain to induce Joseph to think it over and to go back with him; but the young man was firm, and at length the father took leave of both his sons, and with a heavy heart returned home to break the news to his wife. *"29 And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life."* (Matthew 19:29)

In this way Joseph Damien set about the work which was by and by to make his name so famous, though to that he never gave a thought. He does not seem to have dreamed dreams of greatness, like so many boys, or of adventures of which he was always the hero. As far as we can guess, Joseph Damien just did the thing that came next and lay ready to his hand, and thus fitted himself unconsciously for what was greater and better. Just now he had to study hard, and as soon as his father had written to say that neither he nor his mother wished to hold back their son from the life he had chosen, Joseph entered the same college where his brother had received his training for the priesthood.

For some time—we do not know if it was years or only months—Joseph studied hard, hoping that the harder he worked the sooner he would be ready to go forth on "active service" against the sin and misery of the world. His brother's plans were already formed. He was to make one of a band of priests starting for the islands in the South Seas, which more than forty years before had been visited by a band of American missionaries. It was a strange state of things that prevailed in the lovely group of the Sandwich Islands when the missionaries arrived there. The isles had been discovered during the eighteenth century by Captain Cook, but from the white men, chiefly merchants and traders, who followed him the natives learned nothing but evil, and fell victims to horrible diseases hitherto unknown there.

To the Americans, who had left snow and ice behind them, the islands of Hawaii—to use their native name—appeared fairyland itself. Though the sun beat fiercely on them, cool streams rushed down the mountain-side, and in the great forests there was silence as well as darkness. Here the trees were bound together by ropes of flowery creepers, while outside, in the light and air, were groves of towering cocoa palms, standing with their roots almost in the water, and sheltering the huts, which could hardly be seen for the huge clusters of heliotropes, roses, and lilies that overshadowed them. But the sea! the sea! it was there that the greatest marvels were to be found! Fishes, orange, blue and scarlet; corals, seaweeds of every colour, creatures of every form and shape, whose names no white man knew. Afterwards, the missionaries learned that volcanoes were scattered over the islands, some extinct and only showing wide black mouths, others still blazing and throwing up jets of burning lava, which even in the sunshine take on a scarlet hue, and in the night gleam a yellowish white. Besides these wonders, there were also the curious customs of the people to be studied; and it was very necessary to know these, or a man might break the law and incur the penalty of death without having the slightest idea that he was doing any harm. For instance, he might go to pay a friendly visit to a chief, on whom the shadow of the visitor might fall; he might lose his way, and seeing a hut surrounded by a palisade would hasten to ask the shortest road to his tent, not guessing that he was entering the sacred home of a chieftain. If he offered a tired child a drink of cocoa-nut milk or a ripe banana, and she took it, he had brought about her death as certainly as if he had put the rope round her neck. But shortly before the arrival of the Americans a great king had abolished these iron rules, though no doubt they still lingered in out-of-the-way places.

The reigning monarch, son of the late king, was bathing in the marvellous blue sea with his five wives when a messenger brought him word that the white strangers had landed. Full of politeness, like all the islanders, the king at once hastened to greet them, followed by the ladies. The missionaries felt a little awkward, which was foolish, as the Hawaiians seldom wore clothes, being more comfortable without them; but the king noticed that his guests were ill at ease, and determined that he would be careful not to hurt their feelings again.

So when they had taken leave of him, he sent for one of his servants and bade him seek for some clothes belonging to a trader who had died in the palace. A pair of silk stockings was found and a tall and curly brimmed hat, such as in pictures you may see the duke of Wellington wearing after the battle of Waterloo. The king smiled and nodded, and the very next afternoon he put on the hat and the stockings, and highly pleased with himself set out to call upon his visitors. The missionary whose tent he entered was sitting inside with his wife, having just put up in one corner a bed which they had brought with them. They were so amazed at the sight of this strange figure that they stood silently staring; but when, in the act of greeting them, Liholiho's glance fell upon the bed, he completely forgot the object of his visit. "What a delicious soft-looking thing, to be sure!" he said to himself, and with a spring he landed upon the bed, and jumped up and down, while the tall hat rolled away and settled in a corner.

Like many people, when once he had begun to imitate the customs of other nations, king Liholiho was very particular in seeing that he was not put to shame by his own family. The missionary's wife wore clothes, and it was necessary, therefore, that his own ladies should not go uncovered; so orders were given accordingly, and when the white lady came to pay her respects at the palace—a somewhat larger hut than the rest—she found the brown ladies sitting up in great state to receive her, one of the widows of the late king being dressed in a garment made of seventy thicknesses of bark from the trees.

Such were the islands to which Joseph's elder brother longed to go. His own Church had sent out missionaries over twenty years before, who had now written home appealing for helpers. He had given in his name among the first, and had been accepted, when he was suddenly stricken with fever, and forbidden by the doctor to think of carrying out his plan. In vain did he argue and entreat; the doctor was firm. "You would be a hindrance, and not a help," he said, and in a paroxysm of grief the young man hid himself among the bedclothes, where Joseph found him.

"Yes, the doctor is right; you cannot go," sighed the boy, when his brother had poured out the tale of his disappointment. "You might get the fever again, you know, and only strong men are wanted there. But let *me* go instead; I dare say I shall not do as well, but, at any rate, I will do my best."

Now there was a strict rule in the college that no student should post a letter without the superior having first read it. Joseph knew this as well as anyone, but was far too excited and too much afraid of what the superior might say to pay any attention to it. So he wrote secretly to the authorities who were preparing to send out the missionaries, and begged earnestly that he might be allowed to take his brother's place, although he had not yet passed the usual examinations for the priesthood. Perhaps candidates for the South Sea Islands were not very plentiful just then, or there may have been something uncommon about Joseph's letter. At all events he was accepted, and when the news was told him by the superior he could not contain his delight, but rushed out of doors, running and jumping in a manner that would have greatly astonished his bishop, could he have seen it.

For several years he worked hard among the islands making friends with the people, to whom he soon was able to talk in their own language. The young priest knew something about medicine, and could often give them simple remedies, so that they learned to look up to him, and were willing to listen to his teaching of Christianity. He was sociable and pleasant, and always ready to help in any way he could, and he was welcomed by many whose religious views differed from his own. Of course he had not been long there without finding out that the disease of leprosy was terribly common, and that the Government had set apart the island of Molokai as a home for the lepers, in order to prevent the spread of the disease; but the work given him to do lay in other directions, and in spite of the intense pity he felt for these poor outcasts he did not take any part in actual relief.

In the year 1873 Father Damien happened to be sent to the island of Maui, where the great volcano has burnt itself out, and while he was there the bishop came over to consecrate a chapel which had just been built. In his sermon he spoke of the sad condition of the colony at Molokai, and how greatly he wished to spare them a priest who would devote himself entirely to them. But there was much to do elsewhere, and it was only occasionally that one could go even on a visit. Besides, added the bishop, life in Molokai meant a horrible death in a few years at latest, and he could not take upon himself to send any man to that.

Father Damien heard, and a rush of enthusiasm came over him. He had done the work which he had been given faithfully and without murmuring, and now something higher and more difficult was offered. Without a moment's hesitation he turned to the bishop, his face glowing as it had done more than ten years before, when the letter which had decided his career had come to him.

"Some fresh priests have arrived at Hawaii," he said; "they can take my place. Let *me* go to Molokai."

And he went, without losing an hour, for a cattle-boat was sailing that very day for the island of the outcasts.

Every Monday a small steamer left Honolulu for Molokai, bearing any fresh cases of leprosy that had broken out since the departure of the last boat. On the shore were the friends and relations of the doomed passengers, weeping tears as bitter as those of the Athenians in the old story, when the ship each ninth year left the port with the cargo of youths and maidens for the Minotaur. Molokai was only seven hours distance from Hawaii, and on the north side, where the two leper villages lie situated, are high precipices guarded by a rough sea. Inland there are dense groves of trees, huge tree-ferns, and thick matted creepers. Here brilliant-plumaged birds have their home, while about the cliffs fly the long-tailed white bo'sun birds; but as a whole Molokai cannot compare in beauty with the islands which Father Damien had left behind him.

A hospital had been built for the worst cases, and when Father Damien arrived it was quite full. He at once went to see the poor people and did all he could to relieve them a little; and when that was impossible, he sat by their bedsides, speaking to them of the new life they were soon to enjoy, and often he dug their graves, if nobody else could be found to do so. The rest of the lepers had taken fright, and had built themselves wretched houses, or, rather, sheds, of branches of the castor-oil trees, bound together with leaves of sugar-cane or with coarse grass. They passed their time in playing cards, dancing, and drinking, and very rarely took the trouble to wash either themselves or their clothes. But this was not altogether their fault. Molokai, unlike many of the other islands, was very badly off for water, and the lepers had to carry from some distance all that they used. Under these circumstances it was perhaps natural that they should use as little as possible.

Such was the state of things when Father Damien reached Molokai, and in spite of his own efforts, aided sometimes by a few of the stronger and more good-natured of the lepers, such it remained for many months. The poor creatures seem to have grown indifferent to their miseries, or only tried to forget them by getting drunk. Happily the end was at hand; for when a violent gale had blown down all their huts it was plain, even to them, that something must be done, and Father Damien wrote at once to Honolulu the news of the plight they were in.

In a very short time a ship arrived with materials to enable the lepers to have comfortable houses, and carpenters to put them up. Of course these carpenters lived quite separate from the inhabitants of the island, and as long as they did not touch the lepers, or anything used by them, were in no danger of catching the disease; while in order to hasten matters the Father turned his own carpentering talents to advantage, and with the help of some of the leper boys built a good many of the simpler houses, in which the poorer people were to live. Those who were richer, or who had rich friends, could afford more comforts; but all the houses were made after one pattern, with floors raised above the ground, so that no damp or poisonous vapours might affect them.

But while all this was being done, Father Damien knew that it was impossible to keep the village clean and healthy unless it had a better supply of water. He had been too busy since he came to the island to explore the country in search of springs, but now he began to make serious inquiries, and found to his joy that there existed at no very great distance a large and deep lake of cold fresh water, which had never been known to run dry. At his request, pipes were sent over from Honolulu by the next steamer, and Father Damien was never happier in his life than when he and some of the stronger men were laying them down from the lake to the villages with their own hands. Of course there were still some who preferred to be dirty, but for the most part the lepers were thankful indeed for the boon.

Little by little things began to improve, and the king and queen of the islands were always ready and eager to do all they could to benefit the poor lepers and to carry out Father Damien's wishes. Regular allowances of good food were sent weekly to the island, a shop was opened, some Sisters of Mercy came to nurse the sick and look after the children, a doctor established himself in the island, and one or two more priests and helpers arrived to share Father Damien's labours and to comfort him when he felt depressed and sad; while from time to time a ship might be seen steaming into Molokai from Honolulu filled with the relations and friends of the poor stricken people. The sick and the healthy could not, of course, touch each other—*that* was forbidden—but they might sit near enough to talk together, and what happiness it must have been to both! Late in the evening the ship weighed anchor, and good-byes were shouted across the water. No doubt hearts were heavy both on deck and on the shore, where the green cliffs remained crowded as long as the ship was in sight. But it gave the exiles something to look forward to, which meant a great deal in their lives.

Now anyone would have thought that, after all Father Damien had done and obtained for them, the lepers of Molokai would have been filled with gratitude to their priest. But among the inhabitants of the island there was a large number who met him sullenly, with downcast faces, and spoke evil of him behind his back. The priest took no notice, and greeted them as cheerfully as he did the rest, but he knew well the cause of their dislike, and he could take no steps to remove it. The reason was not far to seek; he had tried, and at last succeeded, in putting down the manufacture of spirits from the ki-tree, which grew all over the island, and made those who drank it, not stupid, but almost mad. He had been at Molokai for ten years before their enmity died out, and that was only when they knew that he, like themselves, was a leper!

For the doom, though long delayed, fell upon him. When he first suspected it he consulted some of the doctors then on the island, as, besides the one always living there, there were others who came for a few months to study the disease under great precautions. They laughed at his words, and told him that he was as strong as ever he was, and that no one else could have done what he had done for ten years without catching the disease, but as he had escaped so far he was probably safe to the end. Father Damien did not contradict them. He saw that they really believed what they stated, and were not seeking to soothe his fears; but he went to a German doctor who had not been present with the rest and told him the symptoms he had himself noticed. "You are right," said the doctor after a pause, and Father Damien went out and sat in a lonely place by the sea.

In a little while he had faced it all and was master of himself again—and more; as his condition became known he felt that he was working with a new power. Those who had turned a deaf ear to him before listened to him now; he was no longer a man apart from them, whose health had been preserved by some sort of charm, but one of themselves. And the awful curse had not fallen on him by accident, as it had fallen upon *them*, but he had sought it, wilfully, deliberately, for their sakes. Thus, out of his very distress, came a new joy to Father Damien.

Armed with this knowledge he grew more cheerful than he had ever been before, till the people wondered at him. He held more frequent services in the churches which had sprung up, held classes for the boys, and taught them some of the games that he himself had played in the far-away days in Belgium. The boys were pleasant, well-mannered children, with the strangest names, some native nicknames, others picked up by their fathers from the white people and given to their sons, whereas often they should have been kept for their daughters. In the class of Father Conradi there were Mrs. Tompkins, The Emetic, Susan, Jane Peter, Eyes of Fire, The River of Truth, The First Nose, The Window; while in Honolulu, from which many of them had come, lived their friends, Mrs. Oyster, The Man who Washes his Dimples, Poor Pussy, The Stomach, and The Tired Lizard. We should like to know what their sisters were called, but they were not Father Conradi's business. The Father also took the greatest interest in the experiments which the Sisters of Mercy were carrying on in their school, not only to stop the spread of the disease, but to cure it, for a healing oil had been discovered which had worked marvels in many people. He encouraged the love of music and singing which existed among the exiles, whose most precious possession was a kind of barrel-organ which could play forty tunes, a present from a Scotch lady. This barrel-organ was never absent from any of the entertainments which, with the priests and doctors for audience, the lepers got up from time to time. It even played its part in a performance on one Christmas Day, which consisted of scenes from Belshazzar's feast. Unluckily it was so dark that it was not easy for the audience to know exactly what was going on, but they *did* perceive that the Babylonish king sat the whole time with his head on his arms and his arms on the table, like the Dormouse in the play of "Alice in Wonderland." However, the actors were intensely pleased with themselves, and that was all that mattered.

Father Damien lived for nearly six years after he became a leper, and as long as he was able he took his part in all that was going on, even helping to build the churches (there were five of them now) with his own hands. It was only three weeks before his death that his strength gave out, and he laid himself on his bed, knowing that he would nevermore rise from it. So he died, with his friends around him and the noise of the sea in his ears. His task was done, for he had "set alight a fire" in Molokai "which should never be put out."